

September 1, 2000

Senator Lieberman:

School Choice Is D.C. Students' "Birthright as Americans"

Remarks by Senator Joseph Lieberman (D-CT) on the Lieberman-Coats amendment, which would have provided scholarships to 2,000 low-income students in the District of Columbia, allowing them to attend the public or private school of their choice [Congressional Record, September 30, 1997, page S10194].

Mr. LIEBERMAN. I thank my colleague from Indiana.

Let me pick up on what was said by Senator Coats, citing that this amendment is bleeding the system. Good God, the system is bleeding. It is not this amendment that is bleeding it. What is bleeding it is the failure of the system, and the blood that is being lost are the hopes and dreams of thousands of parents and children trapped in the school system who know it is a failure for them, who know it is not working for them.

Fellow Democrats, Resist Pressure from the Establishment

I appeal to my colleagues, particularly my Democratic colleagues, please look at the facts, cut through the rhetoric. I know there is strong pressure from interest groups representing the establishment, the education status quo. I know that my colleagues on the Democratic side are great believers in the public school system. But remember those words that I think were spoken by John Gardner, that too often debates are between those who are unloving critics and uncritical lovers. We all love the public school system, but open our eyes, look what is happening here.

Senator Kennedy earlier in charting progress in the school system in the District of Columbia said in the last period of time the number of uncertified teachers went from more than 50 to 33 percent. Is that a sign of progress? Yes, it is progress. That is why Senator Brownback and I are working with Delegate Norton and others to bring more money to the District and support [D.C. School Superintendent] General [Julius W.] Becton.

But think about the reality. How many Members of this Senate would send their children to a school system in which one-third of the teachers were uncertified, unless they were forced to send them there because they didn't have the money to get them out?

The Senator from California earlier said, gee, let's take this money, and my colleague and friend from Illinois added, let's put it on top, give it to all the kids, instead of just benefitting this relatively small group of 2,000.

D.C. Schools Are "A Well-Financed Failure"

The *Washington Post* said a while ago in an editorial that the D.C. school system is a well-financed failure. So, the choice here is whether you will put \$7 million on top of the more than \$600 million we put into the system and better finance the failure instead of giving that money and focusing it on 2,000 kids and thereby giving them the opportunity for a better education and a better life.

The D.C. school system already spends \$7,655 a year, more than \$1,500 greater than the national average spent, per student in schools, more than \$1,000 greater than that spent in the school districts in the neighboring counties of Maryland and Virginia.

The debate is not about whether you are for the public schools. Senator Brownback as the chairman and I as the ranking Democrat have worked very hard with General Becton. Progress is being made. This is a system in which buildings are still deteriorating, are deteriorated, kids are afraid to go to schools, teachers are afraid to come and teach. Half the children are dropping out. The longer they stay in the school system, the worse they do compared to national averages on the standardized tests.

We are saying here on this amendment, while we are all working with General Becton to improve this school system, let's recognize that this is a building on fire and let's get some kids out of those parts of the building on fire to give them a chance to better themselves.

Preserving the Status Quo Vs. Putting Children First

This is not a choice between public schools and private, parochial schools. That is a false choice. You can support this amendment and support the public schools in the District. The true choice here is between preserving the status quo at all costs, which is slamming a door in the face of the parents and children who want to do better, and doing what is necessary to put those children first. In other words, asking whether the status quo of the public education orthodoxy, which is letting down so many children, is so important that we are willing to sacrifice the hopes and aspirations of thousands of children for the sake of a process, not for the sake of the children.

What is the interest of government in education? Not to protect a particular form but to educate our children. That is what this amendment is about. It is not a panacea. We have a lot more work to do. There is a recent independent study of the scholarship program similar to this one in Cleveland, and they found it helped produce enormous academic gains in one year. The same is true in Milwaukee.

Also, it will have an effect on this school system in the District, as competition does, to get them to improve what they are doing. Support for choice is growing widely. In a poll, the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies found support for school vouchers is surprisingly strong. They concluded it has substantially increased in the last year. A majority of African-Americans, 57.3 percent, and Hispanics, 65.4 percent, supported school vouchers.

Opposing DC School Choice = Opposing Pell Grants

Mr. President, I want to make a direct appeal to my Democratic colleagues: I don't know why there is only a handful of us who are Democratic Members of this Senate supporting this proposal. This party of ours has been at its best when we have been for opportunity, when we have been for helping people up the ladder of American life — not to give a handout, but to give people a little help, to help them better themselves. That is what this is about. This is not about protecting a status quo, protecting education. Let's focus on human opportunity and the waste of human talent.

In my opinion, voting against this measure, I say with respect, is about the equivalent of voting against Pell Grants or the GI bill or child care programs or any of the host of other programs that Democrats, majority strong, proudly I say, have supported this year and over history.

I think we have just become either uncritical lovers of the school system, the public school system, forgetting our primary education to the children who are there, or are being convinced by those who have a vested interest in the status quo that this is somehow, though on its face a good idea, the proverbial camel's nose

under the tent. This is a lifeline for 2,000 children who are trapped in a school system where none of us would let our kids be. I don't mean all of it, but in many cases in this school system many of the schools we simply would not let our kids attend. We see it in the wealthiest section of this city. Choice supporters see that 65 percent of the families living in Ward 3, the wealthiest in this city, send their children to private schools.

Those ministers and children who came to see us from the poorest sections of this city asked us: Is it fair given this indictment of the District of Columbia public schools by the wealthier families and the wealthier neighborhoods for the Congress to force the poor and disenfranchised to attend schools that we would not ourselves?

I appeal to my colleagues. Break out, break free, and let the kids — 2,000 of them now trapped in this school system — have the freedom that our Constitution provides them, the opportunity that we try to give them, and a future that is their birthright as Americans.

I thank the Chair. I yield the floor.

NB: Headers added by RPC.

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